

OPEN AND SHUT?



Tweets by @RickyPo

Monday, April 27, 2015

The Open Access Interviews: Publisher MDPI

Headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, or more usually MDPI, is an open access publisher that has had a challenging few years. It has been charged with excessively *spamming* researchers in order to maximise APC revenue, it has been accused of *publishing pseudoscience*, and it has been criticised for publishing papers of very poor quality. This has occasionally led to editorial board resignations e.g. [here](#) and [here](#).

The criticism came to a head in February last year, when University of Colorado (Denver) librarian [Jeffrey Beall](#) added MDPI to his controversial list of "Potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers".

Today I am publishing a Q&A with MDPI. First however, in the way of background, I want to rehearse some key events (in date order). Please scroll down if you want to go direct to the interview.

**** Update: Jeffrey Beall removed MDPI from his list on 27th October 2015 ****

**** Update 22nd August 2018: Since posting this interview I have begun to wonder whether MDPI responds adequately to concerns people raise about its processes. E.g. [here](#). ****

**** Update 5th September 2018: I also find [this story](#) concerning ****

**** Update 10th June 2020: MDPI Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness following the posting of a controversial message by MDPI Founder Shu-Kun Lin ****

**** Update 8th December 2020: MDPI Founder Shu-Kun Lin posts controversial message on mailing list ****



From left to right: Alistair Freeland, Delia Costache, Dietrich Rordorf, Maria Schalnich, Martyn Rittman, Shu-Kun Lin, Franck Vazquez

A target for criticism, but favoured by some

MDPI AG was spun out of Molecular Diversity Preservation International (MDPI) in 2010 by the owner of both organisations Shu-Kun Lin, along with the then CEO of MDPI Dietrich Rordorf. In the process a number of journals were relocated to MDPI, and since then MDPI's portfolio of open access journals has grown to 137. Last year MDPI published over 12,000 papers.

MDPI's difficulties appear to have started in December 2010, when one of its journals — *Life* — published a paper by Erik Andrus called *Theory of the Origin, Evolution, and Nature of Life*. Aiming to present a framework to explain life, the paper was greeted with scepticism and ridicule. The popular science and technology magazines *Ars Technica* and *Popular Science*, for instance, characterised the ideas in the paper as "crazy" and "hilarious".

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- About Richard Poynder
- Blog: *Open and Shut?*
- The State of Open Access
- The Basement Interviews
- Open Access Interviews
- Essays on Open Access
- Archive

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- Interview 2: Richard Poynder
- Interview 3: Richard Poynder

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- BASE
- LENS
- Digital Koans
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- Open Access India
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The publication of the paper led to a member of *Life*'s editorial board resigning, and Shu-Kin Lin published a response to the criticism. In his response, Shu-Kin Lin conceded that he had taken over responsibility for the review process when the researcher assigned to the task (a Professor Bassez) has pulled out for personal reasons. But he insisted that the paper had been properly peer reviewed, and that it had been revised in response to the reports of two reviewers. His explanation, however, attracted further criticism.

In April 2011 a second controversy erupted when the MDPI journal *Nutrients* published a paper called *The Australian Paradox: A Substantial Decline in Sugars Intake over the Same Timeframe that Overweight and Obesity Have Increased*. This too attracted criticism, and an Australian economist created a website in order to launch a campaign to have the paper retracted. (There is also a Wikipedia page on the paper [here](#)).

The Australian Paradox paper has not been retracted, but it has twice been corrected by the authors (in 2011 and 2014), and in 2012 the Editor-in-Chief published an editorial about the paper, along with a response to the criticism from the authors. In addition, in July 2014 the University of Sydney (the institution where one of the authors is based) published an independent report concluding that of the seven criticisms that had been levelled at the authors the "only allegation substantiated concerned two 'simple arithmetic' errors, specifically an inconsistency and an incorrect calculation".

Notwithstanding these controversies, MDPI has attracted many supporters, not least amongst OA advocates and cognoscenti of open access. When, on 31st October 2012, MDPI launched a new open access journal called *Publications*, for instance, it was able to recruit well-regarded scholars who specialise in research on open access to its editorial board. Currently, membership of the board includes Mikael Laakso and Bo-Christer Björk (Björk has also published in the journal), and at one time *de facto* leader of the open access movement Peter Suber also served on the board.

OA advocates have also proved more than willing to publish in the journal. Contributors include Heather Morrison ([here](#) and [here](#)), Martin Eve ([here](#)), John Wilbanks ([here](#)), and David Solomon ([here](#)). And in 2013 Björn Brembs agreed to edit a special issue for the journal.

Also of note, the Editor-in-Chief of *Publications* is John Regazzi, a former CEO of Ei Inc. (where he founded the first professional engineering online community — the *Engineering Information Village*). Regazzi is also a former CEO of Elsevier Inc. (I interviewed him for *Information Today* in 1998).

Likewise, a number of open access advocates serve on the editorial board of MDPI's journal *Data*, including Peter Murray-Rust and Ross Mounce (although the journal does not appear to have published any papers).

Finally, we could note that at one point Suber was also on the editorial board of *Future Internet*, an MDPI journal that in January 2010 published an article by Jeffrey Beall called *Metadata for Name Disambiguation and Collocation* (a contribution that Beall later said he regretted).

More criticism, followed by a pass

In April 2013, however, another controversy erupted — this time over the MDPI journal *Entropy*, which published a review paper co-authored by MIT's Stephanie Seneff arguing that glyphosate may be the most important factor in the development of obesity, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, cancer, and infertility.

The paper, which contained no primary research results, attracted considerable criticism (e.g. [here](#)), and was characterised by the popular science magazine *Discover* as pseudoscience. Again, the paper has not been retracted. Explaining why, MDPI told me: "We have recently conducted an enquiry into the glyphosate paper, and other papers in the same special issue. We have decided not to retract, in part based on recent findings from the International Agency for Research on Cancer [see [here](#) and [here](#)] suggesting that glyphosate is 'probably carcinogenic to humans'."

We could note in passing that in total 23 papers have been retracted from MDPI journals.

In 2013, however, MDPI also passed an important and significant test. On 4th October *Science* published an article — *Who's Afraid of Peer Review?* — which reported on an exercise in which fake scientific papers had been sent to 304 fee-

(A print version of this eBook is available [here](#)) Earlier this year I was invited to discuss with Georgia Institute of Technology libraria...



The Life and Death of an Open Access Journal: Q&A with Librarian Marcus Banks

Librarians have been at the forefront of the open access movement since the beginning, not least because in 1998 the Association of Researc...



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***Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...

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The Public Library of Science (PLOS) and the University of California (UC) have today announced a two-year agreement designed to make...

charging open access journals. The papers contained obvious scientific flaws and so should all have been rapidly rejected. In fact, 157 of the journals they were submitted to accepted the paper sent to them, with only 98 rejecting it.

One of the journals targeted in this “sting” was MDPI’s *Cancers*. And to its credit the journal [rejected the paper sent to it](#), saying: “Although your analysis is interesting, your manuscript was not given a high priority rating during the initial screening process.”

And in December 2013 MDPI published a [response](#) to the criticism it was continuing to face for publishing what it characterised as “controversial articles”. Since the motivations for this criticism “vary widely and can include political or corporate agendas, and competing economic or intellectual interests”, suggested MDPI, rather than post critical comments on social networks and blogs, those wishing to critique MDPI papers should “prepare a scientifically rigorous *Comment* and submit it to the Editors of the journal for editorial review”.

But the criticism did not stop. In fact, the situation deteriorated — on February 18th 2014 Beall [placed MDPI on his list](#), alleging (amongst other things) that the publisher was in the habit of adding scholars (including Nobel Prize winners) to its editorial boards without their permission, that it had recruited Peter Suber to the editorial board of *Publications* in order to forestall criticism from OA advocates, that it was launching a fleet of new journals with one-word titles as part of a strategy of creating broad scope journals that would enable it to boost its APC revenues, and that it was regularly publishing controversial papers in order to attract publicity.

On 24th February 2014 MDPI published a [response](#) to Beall’s criticisms, refuting all the allegations and pointing out that Beall is no friend to the open access movement, having the year before mounted a generalised attack on OA in an [article](#) published in the *tripleC* journal called, “The Open-Access Movement is Not Really about Open Access”.

In his article Beall argued that the movement “is an anti-corporatist movement that wants to deny the freedom of the press to companies it disagrees with … [and has] … fostered the creation of numerous predatory publishers and standalone journals, increasing the amount of research misconduct in scholarly publications and the amount of pseudo-science that is published as if it were authentic science.”

Subsequent to Beall adding MDPI to his list (in June 2014), Suber resigned from the editorial board of *Publications*. However, he told me, the two events were not connected. “I was overcommitted, I needed to drop commitments, and I was dropping others at the same time,” he emailed me.

Again, it is important to stress that MDPI has a great many supporters. Some researchers report having had a positive experience publishing in its journals — see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for instance. In addition, the publisher says, it has recruited 6,500 board members, is currently experiencing 3.8 million page views per month, and it has published the work of more than 170,000 unique authors.

We should also point out that MDPI is a member of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)), a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics ([COPE](#)), and its journals are listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals ([DOAJ](#)). Some of its journals are also indexed by [PubMed](#), the [Web of Science](#) and [Scopus](#); and some have [Impact Factors](#).

Concerned at the potential consequences of being placed on Beall’s list, on 25th February 2014, MDPI’s Dietrich Rordorf emailed the Chancellor of Beall’s institution asking him to intervene (presumably to have MDPI removed from the list). Rordorf complained that Beall was publishing false information about MDPI. He also pointed out that 14 members of UC Denver faculty had published papers with MDPI, and 65 had reviewed papers for it. In addition, he added, one also serves on the [editorial board](#) of MDPI’s *Antibodies* journal.

Rordorf’s request appears to have fallen on deaf ears. As MDPI explains below, “We were referred to a legal counsel and informed that the university was unwilling to investigate inclusion in Beall’s list.”

In the event despite being placed on Beall’s list, MDPI has seen the number of researchers based at UC Denver who have published papers with grow to 34.

Another pass

In 2014 MDPI passed another important test. Conscious that MDPI is a member of its organisation, OASPA conducted an enquiry into its activities, examining the review process that the controversial papers published by *Life* and *Nutrients* had undergone,

Where is the Open Access Foundation?

While the term Open Access (OA) has its origins in the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI), the concept and practice of OA has bee...

Blog Archive

- 2024 (1)
- 2022 (2)
- 2020 (4)
- 2019 (7)
- 2018 (20)
- 2017 (18)
- 2016 (14)
- 2015 (18)
 - December (3)
 - November (1)
 - September (2)
 - August (2)
 - July (1)
 - June (1)
 - May (1)
 - April (2)
- The Open Access Interviews: Publisher MDPI
- Co-publishing with Against the Grain
- March (4)
- February (1)
- 2014 (13)
- 2013 (32)
- 2012 (43)
- 2011 (22)
- 2010 (20)
- 2009 (22)
- 2008 (14)
- 2007 (9)
- 2006 (27)
- 2005 (31)
- 2004 (2)

Followers

and investigating the various allegations raised by Beall. The conclusion: On April 11th 2014 OASPA announced that "Based on our findings we feel satisfied that MDPI continue to meet the OASPA Membership Criteria."

Presumably to help reassure researchers about the rigour of MDPI's peer review process, on 16th May 2014 the then Editor-in-Chief of *Life* announced that the journal planned to introduce a form of open peer review.

For all that, Beall has not removed MDPI from his list. When I asked him about this he replied, "I do not believe I was wrong to place them on my list. I do think the firm belongs there."

Clearly frustrated at Beall's refusal to remove MDPI from his web site, on 14th November 2014 Shu-Kun Lin sent a personal email to Beall, saying, amongst other things, "If you remove the post and remove MDPI from your black list, I can give you the money and help you to do your critics correctly."

When I asked Beall how he had understood Shu-Kun Lin's message he replied, "I interpreted his offer of money as an offer to pay me to remove MDPI from my list."

Explaining his intention below, however, Shu-Kun Lin says, "This offer was to try to help Mr Beall professionalise his operation. Services such as COPE, OASPA and Retraction Watch have managed to maintain themselves and improve their services through raising additional funds."

In March this year I had an email forwarded to me in which an unnamed person who said s/he had worked for MDPI as a student made a number of allegations about MDPI. The email also suggested contacting former MDPI managing editor Francisco Teixeira who, the author said, could provide "more crazy stories".

When I contacted Teixeira he replied, "Let me point out that I parted ways with MDPI some years ago and have not kept in touch or been updated with any of the more recent activities of the publisher. I cannot therefore comment on the current state of the publications. What I can say from the time I worked there is that the company kept a thorough blind peer review for its journals, while still aiming at an expedited publication process (which, of course, was not always possible). Despite having released a 'fleet' of journals at the time, there was a selection of prospective editorial board members and only with a minimum numbers of members a journal would be launched. As for publishing fees, they would only be charged in case the paper was accepted for publishing (no processing fees)."

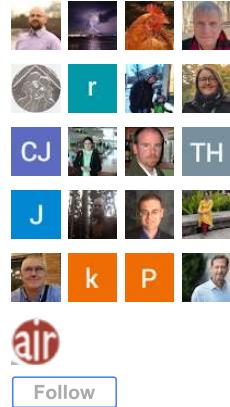
What to make of it?

So what should we make of all this? Personally, I have come to believe that we rarely have sufficient information to make judgements about the quality and probity of any specific publisher, or the rigour of the review process that any particular paper has undergone prior to publication. This is particularly unfortunate given that there appears to have been a breakdown of trust in scholarly publishing, not least due to the growing number of retractions we are witnessing.

What I would prefer to do, therefore, is to pose a few general questions about the phenomenon of so-called predatory publishing.

1. As commentators like John Dupuis have pointed out, predation is by no means confined to open access publishers. Most notoriously, in 2009 it was reported that the leading subscription publisher, Elsevier, had been publishing fake journals. These were sponsored by unnamed pharmaceutical companies and made to look like peer reviewed medical journals. Might it not be better to talk about "predatory behaviour" rather than predatory publishers or predatory journals, and should we not be scrutinising the activities of all scholarly journals, not just open access journals?
2. We have got used to talking about predatory publishers. But what about predatory researchers? And what about the predatory environment in which researchers now have to operate? Clearly, some publishers are guilty of unethical business practices, but fundamentally all they are doing is meeting a market demand. In apportioning blame when things go wrong, therefore, should we not be asking to what extent responsibility ought to be laid at the feet of the research community, and its dysfunctional scholarly communication system, as much as at the feet of publishers? Is not the appalling pressure to publish (both quickly and frequently) that researchers face today an important contributory factor to the growing number of scandals and retractions? In other words, should not as much (if not more) blame and opprobrium be levelled at the causes of the predatory behaviour we see today as on the publishers who profit from this dysfunctional system?

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3. Leaving aside those instances where publishers do blatantly unethical things — like failing to send a paper out for review, ignoring the reviews, or creating fake journals (offences that may in fact be less frequent than we tend to assume) — is it not the case that ultimate responsibility for the publication of erroneous, shoddy, fraudulent and/or fake research belongs to the researchers who produce such papers, and the researchers who fail to review them properly, not to the publisher? After all, publishers are rarely able to judge the value of a piece of research themselves. That is why they ask third-party researchers to make the judgement for them?
4. In light of the current lack of information available to enable us to adequately judge the activities of scholarly publishers, or to evaluate the rigour of the publication process that research papers undergo, should not both scholarly publishers and the research community be committing themselves to much greater transparency than we see today? For instance, should not open peer review now be the norm? Should not the reviews and the names of reviewers be routinely published alongside papers? Should not the eligibility criteria and application procedures for obtaining APC waivers be routinely published on a journal's web site, along with regularly updated data on how many waivers are being granted? Should not publishers be willing to declare the nature and extent of the unsolicited email campaigns they engage in order to recruit submissions? Should not the full details of "big deals" and hybrid OA "offsetting agreements" be made publicly available? Should not publishers be more transparent about why they charge what they charge for APCs? Should not publishers be more transparent about their revenues and profits? For instance, should not privately owned publishers make their accounts available online (even where there is no legal obligation to do so), and should not public companies provide more detailed information about the money they earn from publicly-funded research and exactly how it was earned? And should not publishers whose revenue comes primarily from the public purse be entirely open about who owns the company, and where it is based? Should not the research community refuse to deal with publishers unwilling to do all the above? Did not US Justice Louis D. Brandeis have a point when he said, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

These are just a few questions. There are many more that could be asked.

In the meantime, I invite people to read the Q&A below. When I proposed the interview I invited MDPI founder Shu-Kun Lin and MDPI Chief Production Officer Martyn Rittman to do it jointly. During the process, however, they chose to assign many of the answers to MDPI as an entity, rather than to themselves. In that same spirit, they have provided a group photo to go with the interview.

The interview begins

RP: *Can you both say who you are and what your role at MDPI is, plus provide some brief details about your respective backgrounds and careers prior to MDPI?*

S-K L: I am founder and Publisher of MDPI. I was born in Hanchuan, Hubei Province, China and graduated with a BSc from [Wuhan University](#) in January 1982, majoring in inorganic chemistry. I studied physical chemistry in the [Lanzhou Institute of Chemical Physics](#), Chinese Academy of Sciences (1982–1986, MSc in 1985) and in the USA (University of Louisville, 1987–1989).

I received my doctorate (organic chemistry) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology ([Swiss Institute of Technology, ETH, Zurich](#)) in 1992 after studying for three years in the group of [Prof. Dr. Bernhard Jaun, Laboratory of Organic Chemistry](#).

In 1996, I initiated a samples collection and exchange project, and founded the international organization [MDPI](#) in Switzerland to implement this. In the same year I launched the first MDPI journal [Molecules](#). In 2001 I became a professor at the Ocean University of China (OUC).

I am the founder or co-founder of several other open-access journals: [Entropy](#) (1999), [International Journal of Molecular Sciences](#) (2000), [Sensors](#) (2001), [Marine Drugs](#) (2003) and the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#) (2004).

I became the Editor-in-Chief of [Molecular Diversity](#) (Springer) in 2002 and held this position until my resignation in June 2007. I am the principal author of over 40 publications.

MR: I am Chief Production Officer at MDPI. I graduated in mathematics and physics from the [University of Warwick](#) in 2004, before completing an MSc and PhD under Warwick's interdisciplinary [MOAC program](#). My final project focused on spectroscopy of DNA and modelling biopolymerization processes.

I went on to a three year postdoc at the University of Reading, using atomic force microscopy and small angle X-ray scattering to analyze nano-structured biomaterials. I followed this with a further postdoctoral position at the University of Freiburg, developing TIRF microscopy of protein complexes. I joined MDPI in April 2013.

Further information about MDPI personnel can be found [here](#).

RP: When and why was MDPI founded?

S-K L: I initially started MDPI as a project to preserve rare chemical samples, having seen a number of valuable samples simply disposed of. This project is still running. The first journal, *Molecules*, was started in 1996 to publish the synthesis of samples submitted to the collection. From the beginning, articles have been available for free online.

RP: Where is the company based and who owns it?

S-K L: MDPI is owned by me and has been based in Basel, Switzerland since the outset. Since 2008 we have established three offices in China, two in Beijing and one in Wuhan. However the headquarters of the company remains in Basel and the management, online publication, marketing and training activities are organized from this office.

RP: As I understand it there are two separate organisations: the MDPI Sustainability Foundation (previously Molecular Diversity Preservation International, which was founded by you and Benoit R Turin in 1996), and MDPI AG, an open access publisher that was spun out of the above organisation by you and Dietrich Rordorf in 2010. Is that correct, and are you saying that you are the sole owner of MDPI AG (i.e. you own 100% of the company and there are no other investors)?

S-K L: That is correct, and currently I am the sole owner of the publishing house.

RP: Can you say how many employees MDPI has, how many are based in each of the four offices, and where you personally are based? Also, what specific activities take place in the three Chinese offices?

S-K L: I have lived in Switzerland since 1989 and am currently based in Basel, although there are frequent visits from staff based in Basel to China and vice-versa. There are about 30 employees in the Basel office, and 65 in each of the two offices in Beijing and 90 in the office in Wuhan.

We also employ freelance English editors based in various locations. Editorial work and some management tasks take place in all offices. Our in-house production team doing file conversion (Word or LaTeX to XML and to PDF, HTML) is based in the Chinese offices. The IT team is split between Basel and one of the Beijing offices.

Money and management

RP: What is MDPI's current turnover and profit level? And is any financial information about the company publicly available?

MDPI: The average invoice amount for article processing charges in 2014 was approximately 1,250 CHF and we published over 12,000 papers. About 25% of the papers were published free of charge, mostly in journals that were launched over the past few years but also many invited papers in established journals. We have no other significant revenue streams (e.g. advertising), apart from a modest income from ordered reprints.

RP: Presumably you earn revenue from the circa 60 institutions that have joined the MDPI membership scheme, and perhaps you earn some income from the Sciforum.net site?

S-K L: At present there is no revenue from either of these two. However we may introduce a yearly fee for membership in the future. We also have plans to earn revenue from some aspects of Sciforum.net, although many services, such as MDPI conferences and discussion groups, will remain free for users.

RP: My understanding is that researchers based in institutions that have joined the MDPI membership scheme get a discount when they publish with MDPI. If that is right, what is the discount, and can you say what value the scheme has offered MDPI to date if it has not been earning any revenue from it?

MDPI: The discount available for authors at member institutions is displayed on the institutional membership website [here](#), and is typically 10%. We have seen an

increase in submissions from member institutions and it has helped us to work more closely with librarians.

Member institutions can access our submission system to track papers submitted by their staff and APCs, and receive automated alerts for new submissions. Our aim for the membership scheme is not primarily monetary, but to build more direct links with authors and their institutions.

MDPI is expanding and re-investing a large part of the income (what would otherwise be profits). Nonetheless, the company is debt free and our earnings have allowed us to expand comfortably, while improving and enlarging our services over the years.

So, for instance, we are currently investing in other services like [Sciforum.net](#), which is a registration and abstract processing platform for scholarly societies to handle their conferences. Societies that self-manage their conferences can use it for free.

In 2014 we created a free platform that offers statistics about scholarly publishers and their journals, mostly based on data from CrossRef. Such initiatives take time and have a cost attached, but we want to offer them for free to the community to help support scholarly communication and build transparency.

RP: What is this free platform you mention?

MDP: The site is currently in beta form, but can be viewed [here](#). We expect it to be fully functional later this year.

RP: Your point about reinvestment is well taken, but presumably MDPI has audited accounts. So can I ask again: Can you share with me MDPI's current turnover and its profit (or loss) figure? And can you say whether these figures are publicly available? Are they, for instance, available via a Swiss Companies House? Do you publish them yourself on the Web?

S-K L: MDPI is a privately owned Swiss company and as such has no obligations to publish accounts. We don't currently publish this information, however we reiterate that we are financially sustainable. The revenue in 2014 was around 12 million CHF.

RP: What other business interests do you have, and has any money been used from these to support MDPI, or money from MDPI used to support these other businesses?

S-K L: MDPI neither supports nor is supported by any external businesses or investors.

RP: Can I ask about management. I believe that Dietrich Rordorf has had two periods as CEO of MDPI AG, and is currently CTO, having been replaced by Delia Costache last year. Was this because Dietrich's background is corporate finance rather than publishing, whereas Delia worked as a Journal Publishing Manager at scholarly publisher Wiley? Or was there some other reason?

S-K L: Delia Costache has a great deal of experience in scholarly publishing and she has been the Journal Development Manager of MDPI since she joined in 2013. Since February 2015 she has been the CEO, replacing me who took over from Dietrich Rordorf *ad interim* in 2014.

RP: Why did Dietrich Rordorf cease to be CEO in 2014?

S-K L: This was so that Dietrich could concentrate more time on management of some of the new IT projects, such as Sciforum.net and the publisher statistics site mentioned above. That is where he now focuses the majority of his attention.

RP: How many journals does MDPI currently publish, are they all open access journals, and are they all electronic only?

MDPI: We currently publish 137 journals — see [here](#) for details. All of these are open access and in an online-only format.

RP: You said that MDPI charges approximately 1,250 CHF for publishing a paper. The cost is not the same for all MDPI journals then? Also are there any page charges?

MDPI: We do not apply the same APC to all journals. Established journals with an impact factor have higher APCs than the younger ones. There are no page charges. Specific information about APCs is available [here](#). Applications for waivers or discounts are treated on a case by case basis.

RP: What criteria does MDPI apply when considering a waiver, and what do researchers need to do to demonstrate that a waiver is appropriate in their case?

MDPI: We have an exception process to provide discounts or waivers in cases where authors are no longer able to cover the full Article Processing Charges. Such applications are rare and decisions are made based on the specific details of each case. We also provide waivers and discounts as a service to external editors and publish selected waived papers invited by editors.

Peer review and marketing

RP: What kind of peer review system does MDPI operate — e.g. traditional peer review (blind/double blind etc.), or is some form of open peer review used?

MDPI: All journals offer traditional single blind peer review: the reviewer names are anonymous, and at least two review reports are obtained from at least two reviewers.

Life offers an option for open peer review, by which we mean that authors have the option for review reports to be published with the final manuscript and reviewers can optionally sign the published reports. We plan to expand this to other journals in 2015 and implement a double-blind peer review process for Business and Economics titles.

RP: What exactly is the process that papers go through when they are submitted, and who makes what decision?

MDPI: Managing editors receive submitted manuscripts and perform a basic check, desk rejecting obviously poor manuscripts after consultation with the academic editors (Editor-in-chief, Guest Editor, or an Editorial Board member). The Academic Editor may advise on the selection of reviewers at this stage.

Papers are peer reviewed by at least two independent scholars, with multiple rounds of review where necessary. The final decision to publish is always made by an Academic Editor with no conflict of interest.

RP: Do the journals apply traditional criteria when reviewing papers, or do they use a *PLOS ONE*-style model (no subjective evaluation of a paper's likely impact or importance, but papers must be judged to be "technically sound")?

MDPI: Published papers must be technically sound and provide novelty. In most cases we don't attempt to judge the impact. However, academic editors are empowered to filter as they wish.

RP: What is the average rejection rate of papers submitted to MDPI journals?

MDPI: The overall rejection rate has increased slightly in recent years from around 50% to a value of 52% in 2014. In 2015 it lies at 54% so far.

RP: How many papers have been retracted from MDPI journals, and what is the most common reason for retracting a paper?

MDPI: You can see all 23 retractions from MDPI [here](#). Reasons for retraction vary, and include duplicate publication, plagiarism, fake data, authorship and funding issues, and misrepresented or misinterpreted experiments.

MDPI is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics ([COPE](#)) and follows its guidelines where ethical issues are raised in relation to articles.

RP: Does MDPI seek submissions to its journals by means of unsolicited email messages? If so, how does it target the researchers it approaches, how many messages does it send out a week, and if the recipients do not wish to receive future email invitations what can they do to stop receiving them?

MDPI: We contact selected researchers to invite them to contribute articles to our journals. In almost all cases this is in relation to a special issue, and invitations are coordinated with the Guest Editor. We also enforce strict limits on the number of messages that can be sent and how often individuals are contacted.

We ensure that messages are directed to researchers who match the scope of the invitation and do not, for example, purchase lists of contacts from third parties. We are very aware that misdirected emails are not welcome, however many scholars welcome notifications about opportunities to publish within their field.

Our procedures strictly follow Swiss regulations, including clearly visible information about the pricing of offered services, an option to opt out of future similar messages,

and protection of the data of recipients.

MDPI is not alone in sending out announcements of publishing opportunities. We know from academic editors who work with us that other leading publishing companies also send call for papers e-mails for their journals.

RP: *Can you clarify what you mean when you say that strict limits on the number of messages that can be sent are enforced, and can you say approximately how many unsolicited email invitations are sent out in a typical week?*

MDPI: All such messages are sent out after checking against a central database. This enables us to closely control recipients, for example by performing final checks on the suitability of recipients, check the size of mailings, control frequency of contact, and enforce opt-out requests. A large fraction of recipients are authors, reviewers, editors, or readers, who are already familiar with MDPI journals.

Jeffrey Beall and other critics

RP: *As you will know, US librarian Jeffrey Beall runs a controversial web site in which he lists what he calls “Potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers”. In February 2014, Beall added MDPI. He has also written about MDPI on a number of other occasions alleging, amongst other things, that the publisher spams researchers, that it lists prominent researchers on its editorial boards without their agreement, and that it has published junk science. I know that MDPI has responded to these allegations, and I know that the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) — of which MDPI is a member — has investigated Beall’s claims and given MDPI a clean bill of health. I also know that MDPI has responded separately to the concerns that Beall and others (e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) have raised over the quality of some of the papers it has published. I contacted Beall recently to ask if he now believes he was mistaken to include MDPI on his site. He replied, “I do not believe I was wrong to place them on my list”. Certainly, he has not removed MDPI from it. For the record, do you categorically deny all the allegations that Beall has made against MDPI, and do you reject the suggestion that there is anything predatory about MDPI and/or its business practices?*

MDPI: Of course, we deny all of the accusations made by Jeffrey Beall. He has never made any attempt to contact us to corroborate his claims. We have provided him with sufficient evidence to counter the allegations he made, but he has chosen to ignore this information.

There are many aspects that can be easily checked by looking at the information on our website. For other allegations, we can provide evidence upon request, and have done so to Jeffrey Beall, OASPA, and several other parties who have enquired about these issues.

RP: *At one time the prominent open access advocate Peter Suber was on the editorial board of one of MDPI’s journals — a point made by Beall when he added MDPI to his list. As I understand it, Suber is no longer associated with MDPI in any way. Why is that?*

MDPI: Peter Suber has served on the Editorial boards of *Future Internet* (the same MDPI journal that Jeffrey Beall formerly published a paper in), and subsequently the journal *Publications*. He wrote to us in June 2014 that he no longer has time to serve on the editorial board due to other commitments. He has never had any other formal connection to MDPI, but provided support and advice immediately after Jeffrey Beall added MDPI to his list, for which we are grateful.

RP: *Do you believe that there are predatory open access publishers operating today? If so, how significant a problem do you believe they pose for the research community, and what can/should the community be doing to address the problem?*

MDPI: The term “predatory” is pejorative and implies a business is exploiting its customers, for example by leveraging market position to set prices which — under normal market conditions — could not be realised, engaging in anti-competitive practices, or charging without providing a service. We are aware of some questionable practices by small entities that have tried to use the open access model to make money while providing little or no service.

Unfortunately, some of these practices have had a detrimental effect on the reputation of open access in general, but we believe that authors nowadays are more vigilant. Organisations such as OASPA, DOAJ and COPE, and the numerous indexing services (for example, the Science Citation Index Expanded [Web of

Science], PubMed, Scopus, Compendex etc.) are helpful in identifying reputable publishers that meet standards and adhere to ethical practices.

Whitelists are more useful to authors than blacklists, and the quality of a publisher's practices will show in the published content.

RP: Is MDPI's continued inclusion on Beall's list harming its business in any way?

MDPI: As mentioned above, the majority of scholars are capable of making up their own mind based on the high standards of our editorial practices, membership of relevant organizations, and indexing in the most relevant databases (75 % of our content is indexed in Web of Science, for example).

Few scholars mention Beall's list to us, but when provided with information from our website and OASPA they usually decide to publish with us. Our authors, reviewers and Academic Editors know our practices very well, and they are the most appropriate references for our quality.

The overall effect is difficult to tell, but we have seen continued steady growth in terms of the number of papers published. However, the posting of incorrect information on the internet has certainly not been a benefit.

RP: What can publishers do if they feel that they have been inappropriately added to a black list like the one run by Beall?

MDPI: Jeffrey Beall runs an appeal service, which we requested. However the results were rather confusing. The reviews, supposedly from independent experts, clearly showed that they had not received any of the information we passed to Mr Beall, nor had the time to perform a thorough review.

The reviews included comments like "The instructions to authors is minimal", "sites also lack instructions for referees, which lead me to question whether or not they have any" (This information is easy to obtain and we could have provided on request). Other comments included, "I can 'smell' some corruption" (with no justification for this remark), and "Please accept my apology for delay and not able [sic] to submit a proper report".

We are aware of a number of people who have spoken to Mr Beall to request MDPI's removal, but he has chosen to ignore them.

It is up to the publishing community as a whole to evaluate the methods of Jeffrey Beall and others like him, and decide whether they are capable of running such a service. Given Beall's well-known opposition to open access and his reluctance to run his list in cooperation with others or contact the organisations he criticises, we suggest that he is biased and his methods of assessment are flawed.

RP: I believe that in February 2014, Dietrich Rordorf emailed the Chancellor of the University of Colorado Denver (where Beall is employed) asking him to intervene and have MDPI's name removed from Beall's list. Did he get a sympathetic hearing? Did anything get resolved as a result of Rordorf's email?

MDPI: We were referred to a legal counsel and informed that the university was unwilling to investigate inclusion in Beall's list.

RP: Subsequently you personally emailed Beall (last November, around eight months after OASPA had given MDPI a clean bill of health) to ask him to remove MDPI from his list. In that email you wrote, "If you remove the post and remove MDPI from your black list, I can give you the money and help you to do your critics correctly." Did you receive a response to this email? What did you mean when you said you could give Beall money? And how much money did you have in mind?

S-K L: This offer was to try to help Mr Beall professionalise his operation. Services such as COPE, OASPA and Retraction Watch have managed to maintain themselves and improve their services through raising additional funds.

Mr Beall did not respond to our proposal. Instead, we have undertaken projects such as the publisher statistics website to provide scholars with accurate information about publishers.

RP: MDPI has also been targeted by critics in China, or at least you personally have — most notably by someone called Dr. Xin Ge. I am confused as to what this is all about: can you say briefly what allegations have been made, and why you think you have been targeted?

S-K L: Dr Xin Ge, a former scientist, has been targeting a number of people associated with a well-known Chinese scientist **Dr Shi-Min Fang**, the inaugural winner of the **John Maddox Prize** for “standing up for science”. Dr Ge has written over 20 open letters to *Nature*, none of which have been published. In a letter about me and MDPI, he made **many ridiculous and false allegations**.

It appears, however, that Jeffrey Beall may have read the allegations and been influenced by them. MDPI's relation to Dr Fang is through sponsorship of the “Scientific Spirit Prize”, run in China by Dr Fang.

RP: *In one of his posts Beall says, “When publishers like MDPI disseminate research by science activists like **Stephanie Seneff** and her co-authors, I think it's fair to question the credibility of all the research that MDPI publishes. Will MDPI publish anything for money?” We can assume the answer to this question is no, if only because MDPI did not fall for the John Bohannon sting, the details of which were published in *Science* in 2013. However, some believe that the article-processing charge is an inherently problematic business model since, they say, it puts OA publishers under considerable pressure to publish as many papers as possible. This, they add, will inevitably lower the quality of published research. Would you agree that APCs are problematic, and do you envisage MDPI eventually moving away from the APC in favour of a different kind off business model?*

MDPI: *All papers published by MDPI have been through peer-review by at least two experts.* The final decision to accept a paper is made by an external academic with no conflict of interest – including financial interest – regarding publication: almost all our academic editors work on a voluntary basis and none are full-time employees or operate on a commission. This is the most important step in our editorial procedure to ensure that the decisions to publish are unrelated to financial considerations.

Of course, every publishing model may have its weaknesses, for example subscription models are biased against negative results, and typically earn at least five times the income per paper that a gold open access journal does; journals which rely on prestige have been known to publish flawed papers (see, for instance, the [paper](#) on arsenic-based lifeforms published in *Science* in 2011 — or those published in *Nature* concerning methods of stem cell production ([here](#) and [here](#))).

The current trend for ‘big deals’ for journal subscriptions has led to just a few very large publishers controlling a large amount of academic publishing and less competition. We constantly review our procedures to see where we can improve, and fully investigate any cases of questionable publication reported to us. However, we are satisfied that our processes are robust, and many active scholars around the globe are willing to publish with MDPI.

We do not have plans to move away from the APC model. However we will monitor any emerging models and respond as necessary.

RP: *I am wondering whether it would be easier for researchers to establish who was predatory and who was legitimate if OA publishers were more transparent about their activities and their finances. I am also thinking that greater transparency might prevent legitimate publishers from being accused of being predatory. For instance, I realise that private companies are not obliged by law to publish their accounts, but might it not help if OA publishers did make them public? In addition, some argue that the concept of open access implies more than simply making research freely available, that it also places OA publishers under an obligation to be more transparent and open about their activities than traditional scholarly publishers. Indeed, even publishing consultant Joseph Esposito has called for greater transparency. As he put it, “Let's be open about open access”. Are you sympathetic to such suggestions? If not, what are your reservations?*

MDPI: We think that open access publishers are more transparent about their revenues compared to subscription-based publishers. OA publishers display their charges on the website and one can easily calculate a rough estimate of the income by counting the number of papers.

In the case of subscription based journals, you know the price per subscription, but the number of subscriptions per journal is usually confidential, as well as other sources of income at journal level (advertising, reprints, copyright, etc.). Of course, they publish an annual report, but these are general figures for the company overall, or per division.

RP: *Finally, can you say what plans you have for MDPI in the future, and what your goals are for the company in the next few years?*

S-K L: We aim to continue supporting scholars in communicating and disseminating their research by expanding all of MDPI's ongoing projects.

RP: Thank you very much for taking time to answer my questions.

Posted by Richard Poynder at [10:19](#)



1 comment:

Formerfattie said...



MDPI's AUSTRALIAN PARADOX SCANDAL STILL ALIVE AND WELL

For the record, on the ongoing "Australian Paradox" matter:

1. Research-integrity investigator Professor Robert Clark AO in July 2014 advised co-authors Professor Jennie Brand-Miller and Dr Alan Barclay to re-write their extraordinarily faulty Australian Paradox paper:

"This new paper should be written in a constructive manner that respects issues relating to the data in the Australian Paradox paper raised by the complainant [me]. JBM and AWB responded that they would do so:
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/independent-review-finds-issues-with-controversial-sugar-paper/5618490> ;
<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/RR-response-to-inquiry-report.pdf>

2. JBM and AWB didn't rewrite. Now October 2015, the Charles Perkins Centre's highly influential researchers have not rewritten their "shonky sugar study", and they haven't fixed the formal scientific record. Instead, they continue to operate the University of Sydney's Glycemic Index business that exists in part to charge food companies for stamping products that are up to 99.4% sugar as Low-GI health-foods:
<http://www.gisymbol.com/category/products/sweeteners/>

3. I was enraged in August 2015 when I noticed that instead of correcting her false Australian Paradox "finding" - that there is "an inverse relationship" between sugar consumption and obesity - Professor Brand-Miller assisted the sugar industry to feature her false pro-sugar Australian Paradox "finding", in the process of the industry pretending that added sugar in modern doses is not harmful to public health:
<http://www.srasanz.org/news/do-carbohydrates-cause-weight-gain>
<http://www.srasanz.org/about-us>
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/health-science/a-spoonful-of-sugar-is-not-so-bad/story-e6frg8y6-1226090126776>
pp. 13-15 <http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/obesitysummit.pdf>
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/oby.21371/epdf>

4. Why has MDPI not retracted this extraordinarily faulty paper?
<http://davidgillespie.org/why-wont-sydney-university-retract-the-australian-paradox-paper/> ;
<http://www.australianparadox.com/pdf/RRsubmission2inquiry.pdf> ;
<http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/38743/title/Top-10-Retractions-of-2013/>

5. I'm an economist. I'm keen to know when competence and integrity started playing second fiddle to conflicts-of-interest and pretending in the scientific process.

Regards,
Rory

October 29, 2015 2:24 am

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